

# How to create a happy home when a blended family moves in together

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Meredith Roberts and Steve Shubat's Toronto house was designed keeping in mind a blended family.

For the first 12 years of their relationship, Meredith Roberts and Steve Shubat lived in separate houses in Toronto. They were committed to each other and shared a vacation property up north, but every time they thought about co-habiting in the city, they were stumped by the same question – where?

Neither had the ideal set-up for the other to move in. Shubat lived with his two boys on Gerrard Street, a busy thoroughfare. Roberts's place, where she was raising two daughters, had barely been renovated since the 1930s. "It was lath and plaster, knob and tube – all that," she says. Worse, her diminutive layout was so cramped that Shubat, at 6-foot-3, often felt as though he didn't fit – literally. "The basement felt four and a half feet tall," he says.

Buying something new together had its own complications. "The economics didn't make sense," Shubat says. "Real estate in the city is very expensive, and then there's the real estate commissions and land transfer taxes."

Blended broods, such as Roberts and Shubat's, are common. According to Statistics Canada, they constitute 12.6 per cent of Canada's 3.7 million families with children. Also common: the potential pitfalls of moving in together, including disagreements about who lives where, whose aesthetic predominates and whose art gets hung on the walls – challenges that get exacerbated when people are already established in their own homes, with their own tastes, art, furniture and other possessions. Co-habiting as twentysomethings is one thing, when a couple can barely afford enough Ikea furniture to host their parents for tea. Co-habiting becomes much more difficult when there are long-loved living sets, let alone children, to accommodate.

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The blended home creates an urban-country feel reflecting the couple's love of their rural retreat.

Aesthetic issues might seem relatively minor compared with larger decisions such as whether to share bank accounts or how to mix parenting styles, but settling the design of a blended house goes a long way to creating a sense of comfort. "If someone doesn't feel at home in their own space – if they feel as though the home is their partner's, not theirs together – they might become resentful," Toronto marriage counsellor Tammy Laber says. "Typically, when couples decide to move in together, they are still in the limerence phase of their relationship – the infatuation phase. Actually moving in, people's rough edges often appear."

To smooth the transition, "I always recommend everyone sit down together – including, importantly, the children – to talk through everything from the decor to who will have what bedrooms," Laber says. "For any issues that arise, and there are always issues, I take a solutions-focused approach. Sometimes, people just don't know all the possible ways to solve the problem, beyond getting into a clash of egos. Instead of fighting over what art gets hung over the mantle, why not rotate pieces? Or maybe if one partner decides the art over the mantle, the other can pick two pieces for another location?"





The kitchen has contemporary equipment and fixtures.

Seeking outside guidance, such as a marriage counsellor, can be invaluable, as can consulting an interior designer. “I work with a lot of blended families,” says Mercedes Sanchez Garcia, an interior designer in Richmond, B.C. “Blending requires compromise. I help by staying neutral and looking at the situation objectively. I don’t take sides or get into the emotions. Maybe one couch simply doesn’t fit into a room, pointing that out can help settle an argument.”

For Roberts and Shubat, working with interior designer Meghan Carter is ultimately what convinced the pair that Roberts’s place had the potential to be their shared house – albeit with a rear addition and an excavated basement so that Shubat didn’t feel like a tall man in a tiny house. “She gave us the confidence to act by showing us the potential of what we had,” Roberts says. “She did an incredible job making the place feel like ours, not just mine.”

Part of that involved sourcing new furniture, creating an urban-country feel reflecting the pair’s love of their rural retreat. “We ended up storing our old stuff,” Shubat says, adding how difficult it can be to purge. “Then after a year we just got rid of it.”



In the case of a blended family home, designers suggest understanding the needs and requirements of all members, including children.

By the time Roberts and Shubat moved in with each other three years ago, their kids were off on their own or away at university. Successfully accommodating children, however, also benefits from a considered, thoughtful approach to the interiors.

When Amanda Aerin was designing her own house outside of Ottawa five years ago, she was doing so for her blended family of nine children. Making all the design decisions would have been within her realm of expertise – she’s a successful interior designer well known for her appearances on the *Marilyn Denis Show* – but instead of being authoritarian, “giving everyone a voice was No. 1 for me,” she says. “It was crucial to have the whole family engaged, without me being the boss. It gave everyone a chance to say what things they wanted to keep, what their must-haves were, a favourite chair blanket or pillow or blanket. Eventually, someone has to take the reins and narrow four couches down to one, but at least at that point everyone’s priorities are clear.”



The designers used neutral colours and tones throughout, including bathrooms.

HANDOUT

Similar to marriage counsellor Laber, Aerin looked for creative solutions when issues inevitably arose, even when those issues seemed intractable. “It’s nice when every child has their own bedroom,” Aerin says. “But with the cost of real estate, sometimes tough decisions have to be made. Some of our kids had to share rooms.” As a fix, “we turned an office into what we called a ‘VIP creative space’ to give the kids a bit of extra room,” she says, “It was a designated a space in the house to retreat and have fun, with a sofa, TV and books.”

The shared space also became a place for crafting, which was important way for the family to both bond and decorate. “Everyone was allowed to hang art and photos that represented their past,” Aerin says. “But it was also nice to make new art, and therefore new memories for the walls.”

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